



# **Submission to the Senate Select Committee on School Funding Investment**

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CREATE Foundation



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## About CREATE Foundation

CREATE Foundation is the national peak consumer body for children and young people with an out-of-home care (OOHC) experience. We represent the voices of over 40,000 children and young people currently in care and those who have transitioned from care up to the age of 25.

CREATE Foundation is national and has offices in all of Australia's states and territories. It seeks to provide opportunities for children and young people to have a voice and be heard. CREATE is unique in that it is one of only a handful of organisations in the world, and the only organisation of its kind in Australia, that was established specifically to advocate on behalf of children and young people in care.

Our vision is that all children and young people with a care experience reach their full potential.

Our mission is to create a better life for children and young people in care.

To do this we:

- **CONNECT** children and young people to each other, CREATE, and their community to
- **EMPOWER** children and young people to build self-confidence, self-esteem, and skills that enable them to have a voice and be heard to
- **CHANGE** the care system, in consultation with children and young people, through advocacy to improve policies, practices and services and increase community awareness.

We achieve our mission by facilitating a variety of programs and services for children and young people in care, conducting research, and developing policy to advocate for a better care system. CREATE engages with children and young people at fun events; holds regular Youth Advisory Group meetings to discuss ideas and issues generated by children and young people; conducts formal consultations with children and young people to inform the development of resources, programs, and policies; trains young people to be advocates for themselves and others within child protection systems, and provides financial advice and skills development to help young people transition to independence.

Young Consultants participate in child protection conferences and meetings to share their direct experiences of child protection systems with child protection workers, senior staff, and politicians. It is CREATE's view that improvements to the system must be informed by the knowledge and experiences of the children and young people who live or have lived in OOHC.

CREATE has a national research program, informed by the views of children and young people in OOHC, that drives its advocacy work. CREATE's Report Cards are national research projects conducted every one to two years focussing on issues facing children and young people in care. Some of the special issues CREATE has looked at include education, health, and transitioning to independence.

The most recent Report Card surveyed children and young people in OOHC to provide a benchmark for future evaluations of the impact of the National Standards for OOHC. CREATE's research provides an opportunity for children and young people to give their views on how they are faring, and how the child protection systems in the various Australian jurisdictions are working. These views also inform other research projects, most recently a report into sibling and family contact in the child protection system. Importantly, CREATE's research allows for the views of children and young people to be expressed independently, without influence of political or bureaucratic priorities. (See CREATE's website [[create.org.au/publications/](http://create.org.au/publications/)] for copies of the relevant research reports.)



## Introduction

CREATE Foundation thanks the Senate Select Committee on School Funding Investment (the Committee) for the opportunity to respond to the Terms of Reference (ToR) of its inquiry into the effect of reduced Commonwealth funding for state and territory provided schools. It is essential that child protection issues are recognised by the Committee as children and young people in OOHC are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Australia. CREATE is aware that research consistently reveals that access to, and participation in education are more difficult for children and young people in OOHC to achieve in comparison to their peers in the general population. The gap in educational outcomes that exist for this group contributes to a legacy of marginalisation in society.

At 30 June 2014, there were 43,009 children and young people living in out-of-home care across the eight states and territories of Australia, with 93.4% in home-based care (i.e., foster and kinship care) and 5.5% in residential care (AIHW, 2015a). The number of children and young people in OOHC continues to increase each year, largely driven by increasing numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people entering care, and children and young people remaining in OOHC for longer (AIHW, 2015).

CREATE has developed a Position Paper on Education and OOHC which summarises the evidence related to the experience of, and outcomes achieved by children and young people within educational systems (see Appendix A). CREATE would like to highlight that the OOHC National Standards relevant to education require that children and young people in care are able to “access and participate in education and early childhood services to maximise their educational outcomes” (Standard 6) and that children and young people “up to at least 18 years are supported to be engaged in appropriate education, training and/or employment” (Standard 7). The CREATE Position Paper on Education highlights areas for action to improve engagement and outcomes in education for children and young people in care. This includes calling on federal, state and territory ministers, with responsibility for education and child protection, to implement strategies based on the work of the National Partnership Agreement on Young Attainment and Transitions to better integrate education and child education. Consequently, CREATE advocates for more funding to be directed toward education, not less.

Broadly, this submission substantially addresses the ToR. Notably, given the already poor outcomes for children and young people in OOHC, *any* cuts to education will have a significant trickle-down effect that places this vulnerable group in an even more disadvantaged position. Access to education is an important gateway to health and emotional wellbeing, job satisfaction, economic prosperity, and independence. Equitable access to opportunities for education is a pillar of a socially inclusive society. Put simply, any reduction or dilution of Commonwealth funding for state and territory provided schools compounds the disadvantage already faced by children and young people in OOHC.

## Education and out-of-home care

CREATE research has begun to shed light on the multiple barriers to education this group faces. The CREATE Position Paper on Education identified barriers to education including:

- Placement instability impacting on schooling experiences;
- Financial stress and limited family encouragement;
- Lack of transitional and continuing support;
- Lack of priority given to education from carers, welfare staff, and family; and
- Cultural barriers.



CREATE's 2013 Report Card (McDowall, 2013) surveyed 1069 children and young people in OOHC, aged 8-17 years old, across Australia. The results showed that two thirds of respondents found their overall school experience to be at least "Quite" good. However, there were a number of negative educational outcomes identified. In particular, disrupted schooling due to changing primary schools was likely to be experienced, with those in residential care more likely to have "many changes" of primary schools, as were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people (McDowall, 2013).

The contributing factors to poorer educational outcomes for children and young people in OOHC are complex, so a range of strategies is needed to improve educational outcomes while children and young people are in care and beyond transition to 25 years of age. Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha, and Luckman (2015), in their review of literature on educational outcomes for children and young people with an OOHC experience, found evidence in Australia that educational achievement for children and young people with a care experience is generally lower than their non-care peers.

In 2015, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, by using linked data, provided strong evidence that children in OOHC achieve lower results in standard numeracy and literacy tests compared with their peers in the general public (AIHW, 2015b). This is why cutting investment in education, which will have a negative effect on all students, especially the most marginalised, will have the largest impact on lifelong achievement.

Harvey et al. (2015) argue the need for a national policy for care leavers covering all levels of education and including the community-services sector to increase attainment levels in school education and increase the opportunities for young people with a care background to go on to further education.

### *Higher Education*

While attention to education across the early, primary, and secondary school years is essential, it must continue beyond the end of high school and the transition from care, to support further and higher educational opportunities for care leavers. No consistent data exists in Australia to show the level of higher and further education attainment of young people with a care experience (Harvey et al., 2015). The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 emphasises the importance of transition planning, including proposed engagement in educational programs, to prepare young people for life after they turn 18 years of age (FaHCSIA, 2011). However, this is a time when their support from both government and carers can cease. When CREATE asked young people who had left care whether they had been able to stay in their placement when they turned 18 years old, about 50% indicated that they had been required to leave (McDowall, 2009). The CREATE Report Card 2009 found that after leaving care:

- Only 35% had completed year 12;
- 35% were homeless in the first year of leaving care;
- 29% were unemployed (compared to the national average at the time of 9.7%); and
- 70% were dependent on some form of income support (McDowall, 2009).

Young people with an OOHC background who fail to complete year 12 are disadvantaged in their employment prospects and engagement with further and tertiary education (McDowall, 2009; Mendes, 2014). The constellation of factors which give rise to these lower levels of educational attainment for those who have been in OOHC are not insurmountable. This is why it is so crucial that funding is increased and targeted toward our most disadvantaged children and young people. It is an investment that will last a lifetime.

CREATE supports the following Recommendations made by the Senate Select Committee into the Abbott Government's Budget Cuts (First Interim Report, February 2015):



Recommendation 5: The Committee recommends that the government keeps the promise made to the Australian public not to cut education funding.

Recommendation 6: The Committee recommends that the government abandons plans to deregulate fees in the higher education sector.

Recommendation 7: The Committee recommends that the government maintain HELP debt repayment arrangements that provide assistance for disadvantaged and low SES groups.

Recommendation 8: The Committee recommends that the government reverse funding cuts in the 2014-15 budget to the VET sector.

Recommendation 9: The Committee recommends that the government reverse the cuts to school funding.

## Conclusion

The interaction of many factors heightens the barriers to education faced by a child or young person with an OOHC experience in comparison to their peers in the general population. CREATE recognises the poorer life outcomes, including in education, that generally eventuate for those who have been in OOHC. Strengthening, as opposed to weakening, federal government commitments to investment in education is one step in the right direction when it comes to correcting the inequity that exists for one of our society's most disadvantaged groups.

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## Appendix A



# CREATE Position Paper

## Issue: Education and Out-of-Home Care

### CREATE's Position

CREATE recognises education is an important gateway to health and emotional wellbeing, job satisfaction, economic prosperity, and independence; an absence of education contributes to enduring disadvantage across the life domains beyond the care years. CREATE aims to improve the educational attainment and participation of children and young people in out-of-home care during their school years and increase the number of young people with a care background going on to achieve further education or a higher degree.

For these aims to be achieved, education must be: (a) featured in all aspects of care planning to ensure care environments are orientated to positive and enduring educational experiences; (b) prioritised in outlining the strategies needed to address the child or young person's disrupted placements and associated compromised educational attainment; and (c) addressed in "transition from care" planning to ensure consideration of enrolment in further and higher education along with dedicated financial support (Mindis, 2012).

**Table 1**

***Out-of-Home Care National Standards that Apply to Education (FaHCSIA, 2011)***

National Standards	Measures
6. Children and young people in care access and participate in education and early childhood services to maximise their educational outcomes.	6.1. The proportion of children and young people achieving national reading and numeracy benchmarks 6.2. The number and proportion of three and four year old children who participate in quality early childhood education and child care services.
7. Children and young people up to at least 18 years are supported to be engaged in appropriate education, training and/or employment.	7.1 The proportion of young people who complete year 10 and the proportion who complete year 12 or equivalent Vocational Education and Training.

### Evidence

- People who have been in OOHC have the highest risk of social exclusion as adults and are over represented on every measure of social pathology and disadvantage (Jackson & Cameron, 2012).
- Challenges identified include poorer education chances, education instability, and lower attainment both at school and post schooling (Cashmore, Paxman, & Townsend, 2007; Jackson & Ajayi, 2007; Pecora, Williams, Kessler, Hiripis, O'Brien, Emerson, Herrick, & Torres, 2006).
- The CREATE Report Card 2013 (McDowall, 2013) found that:
  - almost two thirds (64.6%,  $n = 691$ ) of children and young people interviewed described their school experience as quite good or better; 4.0% ( $n = 43$ ) found it quite poor or worse;
  - females and younger age groups were more positive about their schooling than males and older age groups;
  - placement changes can result in some children changing primary schools many times, leading to lower school stability and engagement (this is more of an issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and those living in residential care placements);
  - there is an increased likelihood of suspension from school for those living in residential care or who are male;
  - only 25% of children and young people surveyed ( $n=267$ ) knew about an individual education plan and few had been involved in the development of one.

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- Children in out-of-home care achieve lower results in standard numeracy and literacy tests compared with their peers (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015).
- There is a lack of consistent data in Australia on higher and further education attainment for young people who have left care (Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha, & Luckman, 2015).
- Barriers to educational attainment include:
  - placement instability impacting on schooling experiences;
  - financial stress and limited family encouragement;
  - lack of transitional and continuing support;
  - lack of priority given to education from carers, welfare staff, and family; and
  - cultural barriers
- Three key factors encourage children and young people in out-of-home care to engage in higher and further education:
  - educational optimism from those around;
  - system compatibility between welfare and education; and
  - support of young people after leaving care to help them withstand the challenges of transition while remaining engaged in education (Jurczynsyn & Tilbury, 2012).

## **Actions**

CREATE calls on federal, state and territory ministers with responsibility for education and child protection to implement strategies based on the work of the National Partnership Agreement on Young Attainment and Transitions to better integrate education and child protection. CREATE will advocate for the implementation in each state and territory of policy to ensure that:

1. Children and young people (aged 4-25 years old) who are, or have been in out-of-home care, remain engaged in education and are able to achieve results in line with community standards.
2. All school aged children and young people in out-of-home care have Individual Education Plans (IEP) that are reviewed annually.
3. Integrate education planning into case planning for those preparing to leave care and who have left care in all states and territories.
4. Require federal and state and territory governments to fund targeted education re-engagement strategies for young people with a care experience to 25 years of age, including providing priority enrolment at TAFE, university, college, etc., and fee waiver programs.

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